

Assignment 5 – Your final assessment



Figure 1 *Self Portrait in a Landscape, 1921,*
etching, Leon Underwood.

For the final assessment and penultimate task of the course I have decided to examine the exhibition: *Leon Underwood Figure and Rhythm* as part of the programming rationale of the Pallant House Gallery. I visited the exhibition in April of last year (see the blog post entitled: *Study visit- 'Visit a modern art exhibition'*); and was truly inspired by the works that I had seen.

“The twentieth century saw the arrival of numerous innovative and pioneering sculptors. Yet while Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth are frequently touted as the figureheads of modern British sculpture, the contribution made by Leon Underwood has largely been ignored”. (Whitworth, 2000). Thus the Pallant House Gallery launched an exhibition last year to reassess the contribution of this important artist.

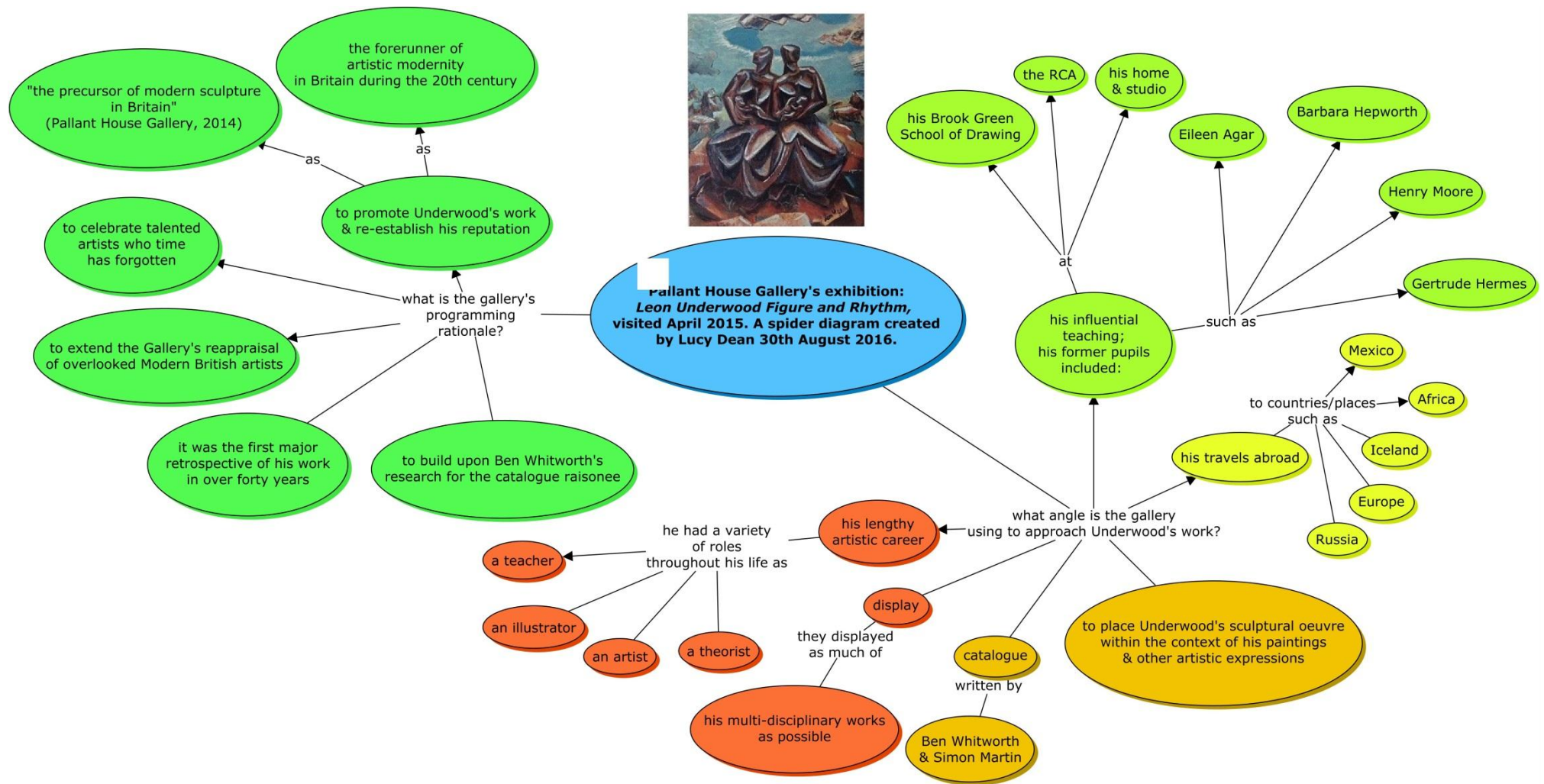


Figure 2 A spider diagram featuring a break-down of my research for this task.

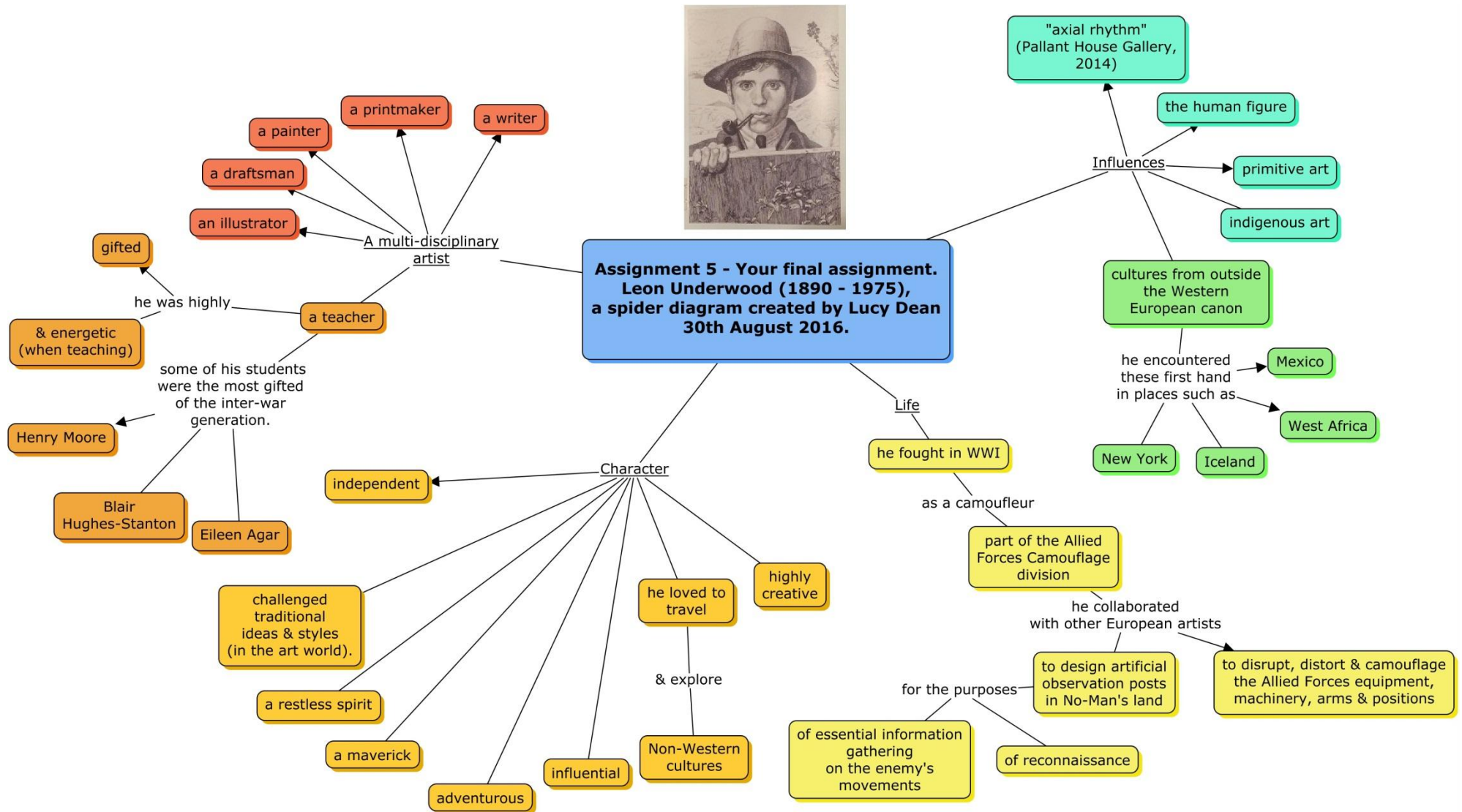


Figure 3 A brief summary of Leon Underwood's life and art.

What is the Pallant House Gallery's rationale for artistic programmes?

The Pallant House Gallery has a programming rationale dedicated to the “appraisal of overlooked Modern British artists” (Pallant House Gallery, 2014). This includes re-evaluating the works by Leon Underwood who is considered by the Gallery as “the precursor of modern sculpture in Britain” (Pallant House Gallery, 2014). He has sadly been overlooked in the history of British art as his oeuvre is extremely varied and thus avoids categorisation. He also had an independent spirit and as such although he was a part of the art teaching establishment he was also increasingly active on the art scene. He continually devised new ideas to avoid his art becoming stale and monotonous.

Why did they want to have the show?

The Gallery wanted to launch a retrospective of Underwood's work as it was long overdue. In fact prior to this his last major show had been over forty five years earlier. Also, the Curator and Artistic Director Simon Martin; had been conducting some research into the family's private collection and had unearthed some new and previously unseen aspects of Underwood's oeuvre (Apollo, 2015). This show was particularly interesting to visit as it was the first time that a gallery had assembled such a vast array of Underwood's pieces under one roof. Previous to this visit Underwood's work had been unfamiliar to me; and I was pleasantly surprised by the myriad of media and styles that he had experimented with over the course of his career. He was extremely prolific, and the gallery did a superb job of devising an exhibition which linked all of his works together by style, theme and inspiration. It was also interesting to learn more about his celebrated students, as many of them were fortunate to visit his studio and to experience his original works of art in-situ. His personal collection contained many beautiful artefacts from all over the world. The Gallery also conveyed the influence of Underwood's Brook Green School of Drawing where students such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth drew some of his Primitive artefacts. I'm sure that these sculptures would have provided an unending source of inspiration for all of them, both teacher and students alike (Pallant House Gallery, n.d.).

What angle(s) are they using to approach Leon Underwood's work, both in terms of the display and the catalogue?

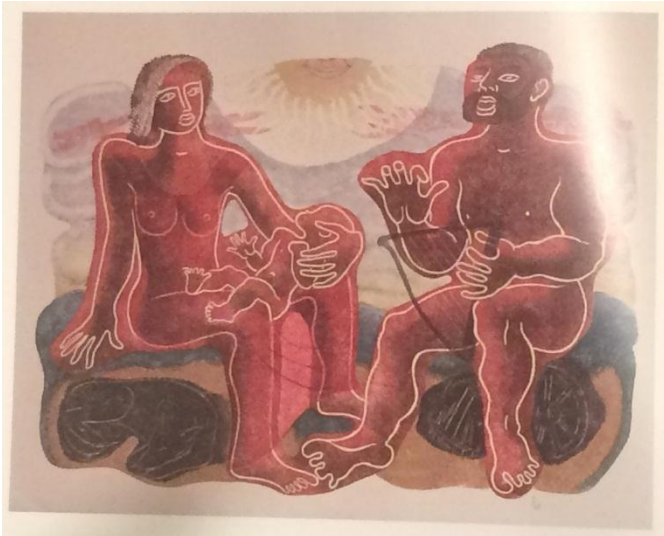


Figure 5 *The Growth of Habitation: The Family*, 1942, linocut on paper, by Leon Underwood.

The angle chiefly used by the Gallery is to place his sculptural oeuvre within the context of his paintings and other artistic disciplines. The idea being that as much as of his multi-disciplinary work was on display as possible. The result was very cohesive and well devised. The sculptures make far more sense when placed alongside works of a similar nature and style. One of my favourite pieces was his bronze figure sculpture *Music in Line*, 1937, as it has beautiful rhythmic qualities which are enhanced by the curvilinear metallic lines which direct the viewer's eyes around the piece. It shares similarities with a linocut entitled: *The Growth of Habitation: The Family*, 1942, due to the similar use of outlines to provide definition, form and lyricism (Martin, 2015).

Also, although Underwood explored many styles and techniques

throughout his life, the figure remained a constant source of inspiration. On many occasions he reinterpreted an earlier drawing in order to produce it sculpturally in three dimensions. So the

Gallery tried to redress the balance between his two dimensional and three dimensional works (Martin, 2015).

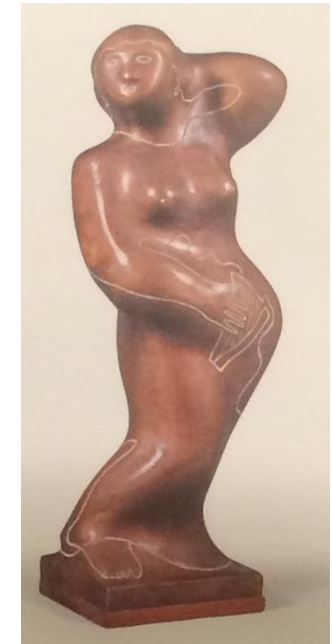


Figure 4 *Music in Line*, 1937, bronze, by Leon Underwood.

What have they said about the exhibition or the artist's work?

The gallery has said that: "the exhibition seeks to present Underwood's creativity in the round" (Apollo, 2015). So the show also includes works he produced as a camouflage artist in the First World War and his late bronzes of the 1960s based on themes of philosophy. Simon Martin, Artistic Director of the Pallant House Gallery states the importance of devoting exhibitions to long-forgotten, but often remarkable artists: "I passionately believe that these kinds of exhibitions that reassess artists are important. Perhaps we have developed a niche for this at Pallant House Gallery" (Apollo, 2015). The Gallery certainly did an excellent job of tying all of the different elements of his oeuvre together in a manner that can be easily understood by visitors and critics alike.

Conclusion

The gallery also conveyed just how influential Underwood was in the history of Modern British Art, as he is considered to be the fore-father of artistic modernity in twentieth century Britain. It is difficult to say how the careers of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Eileen Agar and others would have developed without his influence. After all, he was one of the few artists working in a primitive style, who had actually visited the cultures whose work he was trying to emulate. It seems to me that his students were very fortunate to have such an enthusiastic teacher who opened his doors to allow them to benefit from his teaching and instruction (Martin, 2015).

It seems to me that the reason for his absence from the annals of Modern British Art is likely to be because he avoided categorisation in favour of producing works of art which appealed to him, rather than producing works for a specific market. After all the art world is essentially a commercial business, so perhaps his students were happier to create works to please their patrons and certain critics, rather than producing works for their own benefit. Some critics suggest that: "Underwood allowed himself to be half-forgotten" (Martin, 2015), due to an absence of personal ambition and a distrust of the commercial art world. I think this is unfair as I can see from the scale and breadth of Underwood's work that he certainly had plenty of ambition, but perhaps he struggled to find the right champions for his work?

Bibliography

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